

Saviors of Backcountry History: Brooks Gilmore

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Abstract:

In late March, 2012, I traveled from Greensboro, North Carolina, down U.S. Highway 421 to the Tick Creek area of Chatham County, near the small town of Bonlee. Here I spent a few days with my in-laws, Dr. Brooks Gilmore and his wife Dawn, at their ancestral home, a reconstruction of the 1755 John Brooks house, which was Chatham County's first framed house with glass windows. The Gilmores' reconstruction rests on the foundation of the original house and is located just south of Tick Creek on land granted in the mid-18th century by England's King George II. I have visited here many times with my wife Dora, the Gilmores' eldest daughter. However, my purpose on this occasion was to spend a few focused days talking with Dr. Gilmore about history, exploring cemeteries with him, and filling in as best I could some of the gaps in the historical notes I have been making since my first visit to Chatham County more than twenty years ago. Much of the following account is drawn from our conversations recorded on March 23-24, 2012. In the essay that follows, I have retained Dr. Gilmore's own words wherever possible, as they reveal so clearly his lifelong engagement with this place and its people.

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Article:

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Saviors of Backcountry History: Brooks Gilmore

BY WILLIAM M. NELSON

In late March, 2012, I traveled from Greensboro, North Carolina, down U.S. Highway 421 to the Tick Creek area of Chatham County, near the small town of Bonlee. Here I spent a few days with my in-laws, Dr. Brooks Gilmore and his wife Dawn, at their ancestral home, a reconstruction of the 1755 John Brooks house, which was Chatham County's first framed house with glass windows. The Gilmores' reconstruction rests on the foundation of the original house and is located just south of Tick Creek on land granted in the mid-18th century by England's King George II. I have visited here many times with my wife Dora, the Gilmores' eldest daughter. However, my purpose on this occasion was to spend a few focused days talking with Dr. Gilmore about history, exploring cemeteries with him, and filling in as best I could some of the gaps in the historical notes I have been making since my first visit to Chatham County more than twenty years ago. Much of the following account is drawn from our conversations recorded on March 23-24, 2012. In the essay that follows, I have retained Dr. Gilmore's own words wherever possible, as they reveal so clearly his lifelong engagement with this place and its people.



Brooks Gilmore and his wife Dawn in the “keeping room” of the reconstructed 1755 John Brooks house.

Dr. Gilmore is a descendent of William Tell Brooks (1809-1883), seen here in a reproduction of his portrait, the original of which is held by Wake Forest University. William Tell was a member of Wake Forest's first graduating class in 1834 and remained there as a professor for his entire career. (Photograph courtesy of the Wake Forest University Office of Planned Giving.)

Brooks Webster Gilmore

A retired physician with wide-ranging historical interests, Brooks Webster Gilmore has long been an active historian of the North Carolina backcountry, particularly the southwestern part of Chatham County, where he traces his family roots. Although he was reared in Greensboro, Gilmore spent his childhood summers in and around Bonlee, dividing time between the homes of his maternal grandmother Webster and paternal grandmother Gilmore. He later earned a biology degree from Wake Forest College and a medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania. At both institutions Gilmore's interest in history flourished, leading him to minor in the subject at Wake Forest and to pursue medical history at Penn, where he was a founding member of the William Osler Society. After serving in the United States Army as a Captain and as Chief of Medicine at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, Gilmore returned to North Carolina with Dawn and their four daughters, where he practiced internal medicine for forty years at the Gilmore Clinic, established in Greensboro by his father Dr. Clyde Manley Gilmore (1900-1955). Over the course of his professional career, Gilmore made his way to Chatham County as often as possible, staying for many years at the family farm on Gilmore Lodge Road to the north of Tick Creek. Since 2004 he and Dawn have lived much of the time in the reconstructed Brooks home, located on Ike Brooks Road just across the creek from Gilmore Lodge. In both these places the Gilmores have graciously hosted family and friends over the years, as well as organizations such as the Guilford Battleground Company, the North Carolina Herb Society, and the Chatham Historical Association, which Gilmore has served as a patron member, a contributor of articles, and a member of the Board of Directors. Dr. Gilmore is a Life Fellow of England's Royal Society of Medicine.

The Land and People

Arriving at the Gilmore's home toward the end of an unusually hot March, I feared that the bloodsucking arachnids long infamous here—Tick Creek had its name by 1775—might well be out in force by the time Gilmore and I walked to the old Tick Creek cemetery that afternoon. As we made our way there, I asked him how this area got its name. He responded with humor to my naïve question:

Well, you really have to be Phi Beta Kappa to figure that out! Why on earth would they call it Tick Creek? The truth is that I do not know why the place is so conducive to ticks. But they are especially concentrated here, and this surprises people who are not from these parts. I heard a talk not long ago by one of our infectious disease specialists on Lyme Disease and Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever. He remarked that there is actually a place around here named Tick Creek. I answered "Yes, that's my creek!" Then I took a few samples over to show the medical residents who had never seen a tick. One of them asked "How did you collect them? Did you go out and beat the bushes?" "No," I replied, "they collected me."

Born in 1929, Gilmore remembers the challenge of automobile travel from Greensboro to Chatham County in the days before the "new" highway 421 was built:

Old 421 was paved and my father's early 1930s car drove well on that. Off 421 it was a different story. All the roads were dirt and most were not good. Some were just muddy ruts for much of the year. Gilmore Lodge, which my father inherited from his parents and used first for farming operations and later on for hunting, was a couple of miles from 421. Sometimes my father's car wound up mired in the mud on Gilmore Lodge Road. Of course this was a big problem for the farmers, who frequently got stuck.

One of the farmers whose life was greatly affected by Chatham County's poor roads was Charlie Thomas (1911-2006), a lifelong friend of the Gilmores and for many years the manager of Gilmore Lodge. When Thomas was a young boy, his father's wagon became stranded in the mud while carrying a load of cross ties to Siler City:

In those days farmers cut cross ties during winter to make a little money. It was on a cold winter day that Mr. Thomas worked deep in the mud to free his wagon, and as a result he contracted pneumonia and died. This made it necessary for Charlie to work on the farm early on. He was a very smart boy. My father observed this. He saw that Charlie had promise and wanted to help him get a college education. He made an offer of support to the Thomas family, but Charlie's older brother rejected it. 'Charlie is needed on the farm,' he told my father.

What formal education Thomas did receive began, as Gilmore relates, at the 1755 John Brooks home:

The old house had fallen to ruin by 1940. When Dawn and I started our research for the reconstruction, we knew of a few people living who had been in the original house, and one of them was Charlie Thomas. He remembered coming over here in the 1920s to a subscription school that was run in the house. This was back before public schools were established. The neighbors would get up a fund and collect money to employ a teacher. Then the teacher would come to the neighborhood, and the neighbors would pay for the instruction of their children. This is why they called it a subscription school. Charlie and his classmates walked over here from Rives Chapel Church, and he remembered many details about the house that were helpful to us in planning the reconstruction.

Thomas not only became a successful farmer but also a political force in Chatham County. He was active in the Democratic Party, and it was through his influence that several of the roads along Tick Creek were named for members of the Brooks and Gilmore families. He had a wry sense of humor, an example of which is on display in his use of the nickname "Ike" for Isaac Brooks in the naming of "Ike Brooks Road." Gilmore's wit was a good match for that of his friend, and the two rarely missed an

opportunity for repartee. Gilmore even ribbed Thomas in print on at least one occasion, referring to him in a published article as “a tall, lanky fellow.”¹

I asked Gilmore when the Chatham County back roads began being paved:

The roads were not improved until Kerr Scott (1896-1958) became governor. His campaign promise had been to “get the farmers out of the mud.” Governor Scott and my father were good friends, and we sometimes had him down here to go bird hunting. Well, the day before he was to arrive my father would send out one of his hired men who looked after the bird dogs to go and shoot some quail. The next morning they were out in the field, and every time the governor shot the hired man would run into the field hollering “You got it, governor! You got it!” Then he’d pull a quail out of his pocket and bring it back to the hunting party. Not long after that Gilmore Lodge Road was paved.

In his youth Gilmore also travelled by train on the A&W, the Atlantic and Western, which remains in use now only as a freight line. By the time he was six his mother, Juanita Webster Gilmore (1899-1979), would put him on the train by himself to Bonlee:

It was a small town—just a few stores—and I would go to my Grandmother Webster's house. How did I know she would be home? She never went anywhere, except out to tend the chickens or to go to church. Otherwise she was there all the time. Can you imagine putting a six-year-old on a train now? They would be after you for that. I also went to my Grandmother Gilmore's house in summertime. She was a hard woman, which she had to be in those days. The worst thing she could see was a small boy not doing anything. She allowed Sunday afternoon off, but otherwise it was to the garden to pull grass, to pick up sticks, or to do any work that needed doing. I would climb up in the cedar tree to hide from her. Once I escaped up in the grape arbor, and she walked around underneath poking at me with her cane. Still, she was also a very well-educated woman. She wrote letters to the newspaper and was a keen student of politics. She was sometimes intimidating. Neither my father nor any of my uncles would cross her.

The quality of Chatham County soil is not the best, as Gilmore and others have observed. It contains too much clay for good farming but not enough clay for good pottery:

There were some potters here, though not nearly so many as south of here in a place like Seagrove. George Washington Paschal, the historian of Wake Forest who was one of my father's friends, always said “There is

¹ Brooks Gilmore, “History and the Gilmore Lodge,” in *The Chatham Historical Journal* 16, no. 1 (Pittsboro, N.C.: Chatham County Historical Association, 2003), 3.

nothing in Chatham County but rocks and rabbits.” And of course you do not see many rabbits here nowadays. But they used to be everywhere. I can remember hunting them. The rabbits from here were well known and served widely up north—“Chatham Rabbits” were on the menu in fine restaurants. The local boys made money by trapping them in boxes and selling them over in Bonlee. They did not skin them. They gutted them and shipped them with the skin on. They used to ship carloads of rabbits out of Chatham County, out of Bonlee. But then the rabbits disappeared. One reason for this is that farming diminished, so there was not much for the rabbits to eat. Another cause was the introduction of raccoons by hunters. There had not been raccoons here for years and years, but they were brought in and they cleaned out the baby rabbits from their nests.

Chatham’s poor soil, lamented by many over the years, has proven a ready source of wistful humor:

Bennett is a little town about fifteen miles from Bonlee. It is still in Chatham County but almost to the Randolph County line. The land there was so poor for farming—it is really just yellow clay—that folks around here always said when a rabbit wanted to cross from Bonlee to Bennett, he had to carry his own rations. And there was another saying. When telephones were first installed in Bennett, it was said that they had to put fertilizer on the telephone poles before anybody could talk on the wires. That’s how poor the land was. Speaking of Bennett, there was a railroad from there to Bonlee, built by John H. Dunlap for the transportation of timber. At that time if you were president of a railroad you could get a pass to go on all the railroads. Dunlap applied for the pass but one of the other railroads would not give it to him because his line wasn’t long enough. He replied, “Well, my railroad may not be as long as yours but it is just as wide.”²

Much of the land that was so poor has been built up by the chicken farmers over the years, who have fertilized with manure to create some good pasture land. However, Chatham County has never really had a widely cultivated major cash crop:

Certainly the land was not very good for tobacco. But cotton was grown here until the boll weevil came and wiped out that cash crop. So really, timber has been the mainstay, though some corn and wheat have been cultivated. But the fields were never very large, and as time passed it became clear that farms in Chatham could not compete with the larger, richer operations. Before the arrival of the boll weevil, there was cotton grown right here in the fields along Tick Creek. In fact, before the Civil

² Wade Hampton Hadley, Doris Goerch Horton, Nell Craig Strowd, *Chatham County, 1771-1971* (Durham, N.C.: Moore Publishing Company), 1971. This history of Chatham County includes on p. 190 a version of the story recorded here.

War the area of Gilmore Lodge was known as Cartersville, after the Carter family who lived nearby and had a plantation. There was a post office there, as well as a store, a blacksmithy, and a tanyard. But nothing in Chatham County could compare to the large plantations down east, and the reason people here stayed so poor is that there really was not good farm land. And especially people in the backwoods here had very little means of transportation prior to the railroad, and there was no good river transportation they could use either.



This corn crib (ca. 1840) stood for many years at Gilmore Lodge, an area known as Cartersville before the Civil War. The Gilmores moved it in 2004 to the grounds of the reconstructed Brooks home.

In the mid-1930s Gilmore's father was engaged in extensive farming operations on the land surrounding Gilmore lodge:

He cultivated flowers—gladiolas, tulips, peonies, and such. There were also apple trees and peach trees, and a big cut flower business for florists. I used to do that. You had to get up very early in the morning before the blooms came out and cut them. One of the long fields there at the Lodge was an airstrip from which the cut flowers were flown to New York and other places. My uncle Glenn Gilmore and my father were together in this business, which went belly up after World War II because the tariffs were

removed, allowing the Dutch flower business to produce better and more plentiful bulbs very cheaply. This flooded the market and crowded the American industry out. Later my father got the idea of going into the cow business. He was a successful physician in Greensboro, but he was always drawn to the farm, and he had partners—his ‘buddies’ he called them—who convinced him to invest in a number of ventures, one of which was the dairy business. So he bought a lot of equipment and a variety of expensive cows—Holsteins shipped down from Wisconsin, and Herefords, Brahmas, and Charlets. The Brahmas were wild as deer and would jump the fences. His mother, my grandmother Gilmore, was not impressed by these schemes. She thought he should stick to his medical practice in Greensboro, and she spoke her mind about it: “We sacrificed and saved to send you to college and medical school, and now you come back down here to be a clod-hopping farmer!”

Gilmore’s father had a real love of the Tick Creek area and its people, and he regularly provided medical attention to those who could not afford it:

On Wednesdays, my father’s day off, I would go over to the Lodge, and there they would be, all lined up out in the yard. I think a lot of it was that he wanted to do something for these people, black and white, because they were so poor. He did a lot for black folks in the area, and sent more than one to college, paying all their expenses. I especially remember Sears Headen, who actually lived in our house in Greensboro. He went to North Carolina A & T State University, graduated from there, and later became a prominent attorney in Washington, DC. Sears returned here often, and when he did he always made it a point to come back and see my father.

Gilmore’s engagement in the history of Chatham County evinces a similar affection for both the people and the place. This is readily apparent in his attention to the medical history of the area, particularly in his published examination of the account book for the years 1840-1845 of Chatham County physician Dr. David Watson. Given the difficulty of obtaining information about 19th century medical practice in North Carolina, this is a document of singular historical importance. As Gilmore explains:

The account book is written in a beautiful, clear hand and gives details not only of date and name of patient but also conditions, diagnosis, treatment, and when possible, outcome. This detail would pass muster with today’s demand for complete documentation of medical treatment. The book also gives a feeling for Dr. Watson’s compassion and concern for his patients.³

³ Brooks Gilmore, “Medical Practice in 19th Century Chatham County: Dr. David Watson” in *The Chatham Historical Journal* 13, no. 3 (Pittsboro, N.C.: Chatham County Historical Association, 2000), 1. As Gilmore explains in his introduction, the original ledger is in the possession of family members who live in South Carolina, and a microfilmed copy of the account book is in the North Carolina Archives.

Gilmore goes on to provide information on Watson's family and to place his practice of medicine in historical context. Life was certainly very hard in a remote area such as Chatham, and medical conditions were described as "deplorable" in a letter written in 1833 by Dr. Abram Budd, a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania's Medical School and a physician in Chatham County's Gulf community, at the Egypt coal mine. Regarding Budd's assessment, Gilmore cautions:

...it must be remembered that the great changes in medicine in Great Britain and Europe were just beginning, and the advances in surgery, the understanding of the infectious nature of disease, and other discoveries had not reached rural areas of America. In my opinion, Dr. David Watson was practicing the best medicine for the period, and the documentation in his account book supports that conclusion.⁴

The remainder of the article provides examples from the account book and describes the cases Watson treated, most of which were of an infectious nature and called for the use of strong, even harsh measures regarded not "as curatives or as panaceas but as auxiliaries to restore the natural balance and expel bad humors."⁵ Of particular interest are Watson's extensive accounts of visits to patients, including three days of "heroic measures" on behalf of fellow Chatham County physician, Dr. Isaac Brooks Headen, who was stricken with typhoid fever, or "bilious remittent fever," as Watson and his contemporaries called it.⁶ Gilmore concludes:

Dr. Watson made his visits day and night by horseback, buggy, or wagon. He treated black and white alike. He never used the word slave, but "black" or "Negro." The last entry in the account book is in November of 1845. Not long afterward, Watson suffered a debilitating stroke and died eighteen months later, on 8 September 1847, at his Deep River plantation. Care and compassion were valued, even if the doctor's medications could do little against the conditions and diseases he was treating.⁷

Family and History

For as long as I have known Brooks Gilmore we have conversed at length about history. He is extremely well read in the subject and his interests range widely, from the ancient historians to the modern. Over the years I have managed to pass most of his impromptu quizzes on the ancient Roman historians, with whom I have some acquaintance, but have been out of my depth when our conversation turned to the American Revolution or the Civil War, the history of which he has encyclopedic knowledge. However, it was not until we spoke in his study on the morning of March 24, 2012, that I asked him specifically when he developed his serious interest in history,

⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 4.

⁷ Ibid.

especially of the North Carolina backcountry. He explained that members of his family were always telling stories, often about local characters and family ancestors, and that these stories interested him from an early age. But it was not until he went away to college and discovered the connection between Wake Forest and his family that he began studying history with a sense of purpose and a real feeling of engagement:

My father, and the Brooks men in general, went to Wake Forest, while the women went to Meredith. Soon after I arrived at the college I found out that the Brooks family represented exactly half of the first graduating class at Wake Forest, in 1834. There were four graduates that year, two of whom were Josiah Hawkins Brooks (d. 1865) and William Tell Brooks (1809-1883). They were cousins. Josiah returned here to Chatham County, where he was prominent in the community as a teacher, a lawyer and a minister. But William Tell stayed on at Wake Forest as a member of the faculty. He had come home to Chatham after he graduated—to this house, in fact, because his family lived right here where we are talking now. But not long after William Tell got back, someone from Wake Forest came to the house and said they wanted him to return to the college to teach. So he returned to Wake Forest and stayed there until he died. He was professor of ancient languages, philosophy, and theology, and he served for a decade as Chairman of the Board of Trustees. Another point about William Tell was that he kept a diary of everyday activities when he went to Wake Forest. It is a personal diary in which he tells about what they did and how they attended classes in the morning and later worked in the gardens. This is the only extant account of how the students actually lived. All the other accounts of the period were financial records and so forth. This volume is in Special Collections in the Wake Forest University Library, I believe. Paschal used it to describe how the students lived when writing his three-volume history of Wake Forest.⁸

I asked how the opportunity for a college education came to the Brooks cousins:

Both William Tell and his cousin Josiah Hawkins were young farmers. They could read and write, and perhaps had a little more education than most boys around here. But in 1832 the Baptist State Convention met at Rives Chapel Church about a half mile from here. It was a new church and centrally located. So here it was proposed—and the resolution was passed—to establish a college for the training of young men for the ministry. They went out and looked for a suitable location and found it north of Raleigh. There was a Dr. Calvin Jones who owned a plantation called Wake Forest, or The Forest of Wake, and he sold his property to the school. So that is where William Tell and Josiah Hawkins went.

⁸ George Washington Paschal, *History of Wake Forest College* (Winston-Salem, N.C.: Wake Forest University), 1935. In 1988 Bynum Shaw contributed a fourth volume to this history, covering the years 1943-1967.

The question arises as to why the Brooks cousins did not attend the university in Chapel Hill:

Of course that institution of higher learning was just up the road from here, and at the time the it was a pretty wild place, where there was plenty of horse racing, gambling, and drinking. As the story went, on the weekends they would run the professors off and turn the outhouses over. And at one time the entire senior class was reported to be drunk. The Baptists were not about to go there, where the legislature had to pass a law that no horse racing would take place within two miles of Chapel Hill. Most of the students at the university then were from the well-to-do eastern part of the state. They would bring their servants and horses with them up to Chapel Hill.

Another formative influence on Gilmore's interest in history was the Brooks family genealogy, published in 1950 by Ida Brooks Kellam:

She spent years researching *Brooks and Kindred Families*.⁹ Can you imagine going to courthouses and having to copy all that information by hand, before the days of computers and copying machines? Several members of the Brooks family helped support Kellam's work financially, including my father, and it was finally published after many years in preparation. It is a remarkably complete genealogy and has long served as a model of its kind. Besides all the "who-begat-who" business, she provides a little description of what the people did and who they were, and this biographical information really interested me. And of course there was the Brooks Reunion, which has been going since 1898. This was something that allowed us to get together and exchange stories and information.

A distinguishing feature of Gilmore's reading of history is how comprehensive it is. Although he has focused much of his research on prominent figures in the Brooks family and medical history, he has also examined the details of the Revolutionary War, the Regulator Movement, and the Civil War in the context of regional history and with a keen eye toward the implications for Tick Creek and the surrounding area.

The Revolutionary War

When Gilmore was a student at Wake Forest, he was preparing to attend medical school, so he majored in biology. However, his minor was history. Later, while he was practicing medicine in Greensboro, he studied the Battle of Guilford Courthouse but was unable to locate much information on Revolutionary War history in Chatham County:

⁹ Ida Brooks Kellam, *Brooks and Kindred Families* (Wilmington N.C.), 1950.

I learned that there has been very little written about it. So, I have done a lot of work on this lately, especially regarding the involvement of the Brooks house that we have reconstructed. Of course the Battle of Guilford Courthouse—between the American forces under General Nathaniel Greene and the British under General Lord Charles Cornwallis—was a decisive battle of the Revolutionary War. Actually, the British won the battle but were so decimated that Cornwallis had to abandon his plan to go through Virginia and join the forces at Yorktown. Had he succeeded the British would probably have eliminated George Washington and his army. But Cornwallis had to turn back and go toward the coast of North Carolina. So it was a Pyrrhic victory for the British, and Charles James Fox was the one who announced the results of the battle in Parliament. “Another such victory,” he said, “would destroy the British army.” Of course he was quoting ancient King Pyrrhus of Epirus who sustained heavy losses in defeating the Romans that he said, “Alas, another such victory and I am undone!”

What happened after the Battle of Guilford Courthouse is what interests Gilmore so:

Cornwallis came toward Chatham County, stopping at Dixon’s Mill through Pittsboro and then down to Ramsey’s Mill on the Deep River, where his engineers had built a bridge to cross on their way to Wilmington. Greene pursued Cornwallis, knowing that in his weakened condition he could probably defeat him, if he could catch up with him. Cornwallis was camped at Deep River when he got word that Greene was only two days away. This caused the British to retreat hastily across the river, even leaving their dead unburied. After crossing the river they were going to destroy the bridge to foil pursuit by Greene, who had actually sent some of Henry Lee’s men—Lee’s Legion Cavalry—around the other side of the Deep River to try to keep it from being burned. Lee was not successful because the bridge was too well guarded. When Greene got there he decided not to pursue Cornwallis into loyalist country because he was low on supplies. He did send Lee and his Legion across the river to trail Cornwallis, to keep an eye on where he was going, and also to give the impression that Greene’s whole army was following, after which they were to meet Greene’s main army back in South Carolina. So Greene came back up Deep River to Rocky River—that’s the stream that went through Siler City—and then on to Tick Creek. Here he went to John Wilcox’s Ironworks, which was just right up the creek from where we are sitting now, where he had his horses shod and let his men rest. They camped along the Tick Creek, where the Brooks family had a little grist mill and were up all night grinding corn for the troops. That’s when General Greene stayed here in the Brooks home, and also William Washington and Henry Lee, who had stayed here previously because his Legion came a little different way than Greene’s on the way to Deep

River. They all stayed here. William Washington was some kin to the wife of Isaac Brooks, who was a Terrell from Virginia, so there was some connection there. And of course William Washington, Greene's cavalry commander, was George Washington's cousin. The army camped along the creek up here and they stayed about two days at Wilcox's Ironworks, and then they proceeded on to South Carolina, where they made good on their plan to eliminate the British outpost there.

From the appearance of Tick Creek now, it is hard to imagine that there could ever have been an ironworks located there:

For one thing the water was much deeper at that time. The creek was larger than it is now. But John Wilcox was interesting to me in that his ironworks was right here. He was an iron master from Pennsylvania who got a good opportunity when he came down to North Carolina. Actually he established an ironworks on the Deep River, but the iron there was not of very good quality, and they had to bring it too far. There was also the problem of floods—what they call “freshlets,” spring floods—that would wash the equipment away. Wilcox found a rich deposit of iron ore just about two or three miles from here called Ore Hill, so he put together everything he needed to build a furnace. Actually, most of this was paid for by the state of North Carolina for munitions for the army. It was a big operation. They could cast a two ton canon. There is nothing left of it now—just some rocks up there.

It interests Gilmore that General Greene's activities during and after the Battle of Guilford Courthouse have been examined by historians, but that his movements from Ramsey's Mill have been largely overlooked:

There is nothing written about it. There was a dispatch somewhere from a North Carolina militia about which way Greene went, but to my knowledge it is nothing very significant, though I am not certain of this. However, one of the researchers at Alamance Battlefield located a copy of a notebook by Captain Richard Kirkwood, Commander of the Delaware Company, which indicates that Greene had sent some of Lee's men on a sort of flanking movement on the other side of what is now highway 421 to make sure no British were approaching from that side. Kirkwood's company came down Tick Creek. They camped here. This is recorded in his notebooks, so it is firmly documented. Some have said “Oh, you don't know that. It's just a story passed down through family history.” Well there are many family stories that are either exaggerated or untrue—it was long falsely claimed, for example, that George Washington stayed in the John Brooks house. But we have Kirkwood's diary, so we know that he camped here on March 26, 1781. He was one of the most under-appreciated Revolutionary officers—very competent and well regarded by his men, but he has not been recognized. It was difficult to find a date on

Greene's movements until we got this information. We knew that Greene left Chatham County and went to South Carolina, but it was not clear just which way he went.

The Regulator Movement

Another significant episode that took place at the John Brooks house involved his son Isaac Brooks (1728-1825):

This goes back to the Regulator Movement prior to the Revolution. Isaac Brooks, who actually built the house that bears his father's name, was a Whig. In 1763 he and others signed a petition of the Regulators in Orange County, North Carolina. They were up against Tories led by David Fanning, who had earned very bad reputation and was good at bringing together loyalist followers. He organized them into companies. They were not regular soldiers. Of course the backdrop is that there was a vicious civil war going on here in piedmont North Carolina, into South Carolina—murders, rapes, arson—in this conflict between the Whigs and the Tories. There is not so much written about this, though I see you have Carole Watterson Troxler's book with you.¹⁰ She lectured at Alamance recently, at the anniversary of the Battle of Alamance Courthouse. She was very good. Anyway, the story you refer to involved Isaac Brooks, who was a very prominent Whig and who was being pursued by some of Fanning's men. Isaac ran in the house—this house, or the first version of it—with the Tories in pursuit and shooting at him. Actually there were musket ball holes in the old planks, which disappeared some years ago. Anyway, Isaac came in and ran up the stairs, bolted the door behind him, and the Tories, stuck their bayonets through the door and kicked out a piece of it. Isaac came upstairs—where we are sitting now—got out the back window, climbed down the oak tree, and got away.

Gilmore showed me two historical accounts of this story, the first from the *Chatham Record* of 2 November 1882:

Revolutionary Relics.—The old Brooks homestead (now occupied by E. W. Brooks) is the oldest frame dwelling in this county, having been erected many years before the Revolutionary war. During that war the Tories attacked its owner, who was Isaac Brooks (grandfather of the present occupant), and broke out the panel of the door to his room, and that door still remains with its broken panel. Gen. Greene and his army encamped there, in his pursuit of Cornwallis after the battle of Guilford Court House, the general himself occupying a room in the house. Mr.

¹⁰ Carole Watterson Troxler, *Farming Dissenters: The Regulator Movement in Piedmont North Carolina* (Raleigh, N.C.: Office of Archives and History, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources), 2011.

Brooks has many interesting relics that were picked up at the old camp and carefully preserved.

The second account is an 1890 entry from the diary of the Reverend William Henry Harrison Lawhon, a much respected minister of the Chatham, Lee, and Moore County area:

Spent night with Bro. Edward Brooks. He lives in a house that was built before the Revolutionary War, and the panel of the stair door was broken out by the Tories trying to get to Bro. Brooks' grandpa, who was a Whig. He escaped by climbing out of a window and going down a ladder and never would have the door repaired.

Gilmore continued:

The family story is that Isaac went and got his men, captured one of the Tories and hanged him from the tree out in front of the house. That is how the conflict was so very vicious. This is where the "hanging tree" that used to stand out front got its name. It was a big sycamore. We tried to save it, but it had heart rot so we had to take it down about ten years ago.

Isaac Brooks was one of the Regulators who fought at the Battle of Alamance Courthouse:

He was a member of William Burney's Company at Alamance, where the Regulators met the governor's militia. The Regulators were the farmers and people of this area who were protesting the high taxes that the government was imposing on them. If they had to get a stamp for a deed, for example, they had to pay a charge and then offer something "under the table" to ensure it was actually done. And so the Regulators were incensed about this, and they started to form associations. Isaac was very prominent in this activity, and he was a member of first Colonial Assembly. When the Regulators sent a delegation down to New Bern and saw the palace that had been had built there—well, that really got to them because they knew whose money had gone into it. The governor—Tryon at the time—thought he could split these Regulators by dividing Orange County, which was then ten times larger than it is now, into a number of smaller counties. That's when Chatham County was formed, in 1771, with Pittsboro as the county seat. Surrounding counties were formed in the same way. But really the purpose was to get the Regulators separated. This didn't succeed and the Regulators ran the tax collector Edward Fanning—no connection with David Fanning—out of town on a rail and burned his house down. The governor told them to stop this nonsense, which they refused to do, so he sent out his militia that met the Regulators at Alamance battlefield. And the Regulators were not too well armed or

trained, and some of them only had pitchforks for weapons. So of course they lost the battle.



This historical marker stands on a road in the Tick Creek area of Chatham County named for Isaac Brooks—"Ike Brooks Road"—in front of the restored 1755 John Brooks house. It was Isaac who actually built the house that bore his father's name.

The Brooks family got word that Isaac had been killed:

But he showed up here three days later. Isaac was fortunate because the governor's militia captured a group of the Regulators and took them over to Hillsborough, where they hanged six of them, I believe. And Captain Merrick of the Regulators was hanged, drawn and quartered, with his wife and children forced to look on. You know what a horror that was. The others were eventually pardoned, but not before they were put in chains and paraded around the countryside to show the price to be paid for tax evasion and violence against the king. James Emerson of Chatham was one of these men. He is buried down at the old Tick Creek cemetery at Rives Chapel Church. Last May they had the Sons of the American Revolution put a marker by his grave. That was an interesting ceremony. But to return to Isaac, he was very active, a magistrate, and a well-known citizen here, and in 1771 he qualified as a member of the North Carolina

General Assembly. It was Isaac who in 1773 proposed a deal to the Assembly to build a road from the Dan River in Virginia through Guilford, Chatham, and Cumberland Counties to a point then called Cambellton, which is now Fayetteville, North Carolina. His brother Jacob helped survey it through Chatham County, but it was Isaac who actually prepared the bill, and organized the surveying. So at the present time, when you travel U.S. 421 and cross the Chatham County line into Randolph County to the north or Lee County to the south, you will see the sign along the highway that reads “Isaac Brooks Highway.” For the rest of his life, Isaac Brooks served as a foreman on many juries, was executor of many wills, and was appointed guardian many times. The Chatham County court minutes show that he was a popular and well respected citizen.

A subject of particular interest to Gilmore is out-migration from Chatham County:

There were other members of the Brooks family involved in the Regulator Movement, and after the Battle of Alamance they had to flee. They had a price on their heads. Many immigrated to Tennessee, so there was an out-migration after the Battle of Alamance. Then in the 1820s there was another out-migration. The original North Carolina Constitution was a confining document, and those who wrote it did not want any changes made. As I recall, it was Nathaniel Macon who said that he wanted to be so far away from his neighbor that he would not see his chimney smoke. He was one of many who were resistant to change. They wanted industry and farming to remain the same. So what happened was that many of the more ambitious young people left Chatham County. When those in charge finally realized what was happening—around 1840, I believe—they re-wrote the constitution because the old one didn’t encourage the development of industry, and it discouraged changes in farming. Many members of the Brooks family left at this time.

The Civil War

In recent years, while reconstructing the 1755 Brooks home, Gilmore has been focused on the Revolutionary War period. However, he has an abiding interest in Civil War history, as Company E of the 26th North Carolina Infantry used Gilmore Lodge as a muster ground:

The Civil War is an area of history that has long interested me because just across the creek from where we are sitting right now there was a post office, a store, a foundry, and a tannery—all part of Cartersville and later Gilmore Lodge, where the 26th mustered. All of my father and mother’s people—Brooks, Gilmore, and Webster—got together to enlist. Stephen Webster was made captain because he had experience in the Mexican War. They all enlisted in Company E and took the “cars”—that’s what they called the railroad—to Burlington and then to Camp Crabtree in

Raleigh. They were in every battle from the beginning to the end of the war. And James M. Brooks, my relative, and Daniel Boone Thomas, Charlie Thomas's great uncle, were the two that made it to the top—to what they call the “High Water Mark” at Gettysburg. They survived Pickett's Charge. They crossed where there was a stone wall with the Federals behind it. Of course Pickett's Charge was a suicide mission, and no one could ever understand the tactical thinking behind it. It took place on a field, a half mile or so in length, and the Confederates charged the Yankees, who were entrenched up above and supported by canons. As you know, the Confederates were decimated. One story was that Stewart's cavalry was supposed to come from behind, but I don't know whether that was so. Anyway, James M. Brooks and Daniel Boone Thomas made it to the top. The Federals were going to execute them, when an officer from the Rhode Island Regiment said “Don't shoot them—they are brave men.” Daniel Boone Thomas was carrying the 26th flag, which the Federals took as they pulled them in and said “Come over to the Lord's side.”

Charlie Thomas never tired of quoting these words—“Come over to the Lord's side.” James M. Brooks and Daniel Boone Thomas were captured, but they survived the war and made it back to the Tick Creek area:

Well, as it turned out, I started something with this story—and Charlie would have enjoyed it. I was talking with a history professor after a lecture he gave—I won't mention his name—who said of this story “Aw, that's not so. It didn't happen that way.” So I started looking into it more closely, and by what you might call serendipity there are two sources for this account. The first is the story as told by Charlie's grandfather, who learned it from Daniel Boone Thomas himself. And his words are corroborated in a second source, the notes of the Rhode Island regiment. Somebody wrote about it from the other side. So, isn't that interesting—the same story from both sides. I believe I owe my professor friend a letter!

As noted earlier, the area of Gilmore Lodge was known as Cartersville before the Civil War, and it was used as a muster ground by Company E of the North Carolina Infantry. Both sides of Gilmore's family, the Brooks and the Websters, served in Company E. Among these, his great grandfather Alexander Wilkie Webster served in the war and survived it, later marrying the widow of Brantley Lambert, a Chatham County soldier who was killed at Gettysburg. She was a member of the Crutchfield family who inherited land along Tick Creek that later passed to the Websters. In recent years this has been the scene of several Civil War re-enactments, in which Gilmore has taken a keen interest:

At the Brooks Reunion we hosted the re-enactors. They put on a program right about the time that re-enactment movement was getting underway.

That was when we held the reunion over at Gilmore Lodge. A group of Civil War re-enactors also practiced there, wearing their Confederate uniforms and using muskets and all period equipment, down to their tents and cooking equipment. Then later on my cousin Dennis Brooks became interested in re-enactment, and now he is really busy with it and is involved in what they call “tacticals” for re-enactment of the big battles. Dennis has become very knowledgeable on the subject and has recently given a fine paper on Gettysburg for the Chatham County Historical Association. He is very passionate about Civil War history.

In the aftermath of Civil War the period of Reconstruction brought hard times:

It was a military occupation. Fortunately Sherman did not come directly through Chatham. He and his troops did not cross the Haw River and come here or to Pittsboro. But Federal forces did occupy Chapel Hill, where martial law was imposed for ten years or so. You know, their horses were stabled in the old East dormitory. It was the first brick dormitory at any state university, and they had it full of horses—made a stable of it. Still, Reconstruction was so bitter here in Chatham that a lot of people moved, mostly to Texas. Many members of the Brooks family had immigrated by then to Tennessee—and some to Alabama, and Georgia. But others did go to Texas during Reconstruction. They would write on their cabins “G.T.T.”—gone to Texas. The big attraction to Texas of course was land—and to get away from the Yankees.



The reconstructed 1755 John Brooks house with the handiwork of master gardener Dawn Gilmore in the foreground. The gambrel roof was unusual in this region, as were the glass windows.

Reconstructing the 1755 John Brooks House

On my first visits to the Tick Creek area in the early 1990s, Gilmore and I often drove from the Lodge over to Ike Brooks road to visit the site where the 1755 John Brooks home once stood. We parked by the historical marker that bears a brief biography of Isaac Brooks, and then walked over to the big sycamore—the aforementioned “hanging tree”—that was still standing at that time alongside the foundation of the old house. Our conversations here gathered up the history of this place, from the details of domestic life—What color did the early occupants of this house paint their walls? In what kinds of beds did sleep?—to the larger subjects of war, migration, disease, and mortality. To listen to Gilmore talk about the house that stood on this land for nearly two centuries was to hear the Brooks home described as a complex repository of one family’s long history and its interaction over time with the community of Tick Creek. Gilmore spoke of the previous occupants and the lives they lived here along the following timeline:

- 1755: John and Susan Brooks
- 1770: Isaac Brooks and Ruth Terrell Brooks
- 1820: William Terrell Brooks and Susan Warren Brooks
- 1860: Edward Warren Brooks and in succession his three wives, the last one being Elizabeth Kidd Brooks
- 1895: Isaac T. Brooks and Mary Kidd Brooks
- 1911: Lillie Elizabeth Brooks

The Gilmores already had a possible reconstruction of the Brooks house in mind by the early 1990s. A decade or so later, after they had conducted much research and the building was underway, I asked how they had gone about the whole process, and what sources and records they used. Gilmore explained:

The place was in ruins by the late 1930s, and by 1940 there was nothing left but the foundation and a few timbers. However, we had old photographs that were probably made with the first Kodak camera. And, in addition to what Charlie Thomas remembered about the details of the house, we had a relative in Sanford, North Carolina, Annie Laurie Pomeranz, who had saved artifacts collected by her father and grandfather, including a number of these photographs. Another relative from Sanford, Ida Brooks Kellam, author of the Brooks genealogy, had also been in the house. So we had plenty of historical evidence and knew what the house looked like. There were other sources as well, including a Raleigh newspaper from 1870, I believe, that included a reporter’s account.

The most striking feature of the house’s exterior is the roof:

It is called a gambrel roof, which is very unusual in this area. It is a roof that comes down, and down again, and provides much more room on the second floor. The word itself derives from the bent part of a horse’s leg—

the “hock,” as it is called—and refers to the bent rafter line of the roof. It has long been thought the first house in Chatham County that had glass windows, and the first house that was beam framed. Of course this differed significantly from the log cabins that the other settlers had, the logs of which were “chinked and daubed.” Chinking involved putting little rocks and sticks between the logs, after which they would daub them with mud mixed with straw. Often the door was covered by a deer skin and the windows by wooden shutters. But the Brooks evidently were fairly well-to-do to have had a house like this, which was built by skilled carpenters.

For the practical reason that the Gilmores use the house as a living space, the interior is authentic in many but not all details:

Dawn has done extensive research on decorating the interior of the house—everything from the color schemes of the period to the content of the stains used on the walls and ceiling. We learned much about the appearance of the first floor room, which was called the “keeping room” from the people we knew who had been in the house. The early occupants did not hang pictures on the walls as we have. In addition to the portrait of William Tell Brooks, we have decorated with a few portraits of historical figures associated with the house—Colonel William Washington, General Nathaniel Greene, and Colonel Henry Lee. The early occupants also kept to one room for much of the year because the fireplace was located there and the rest of the house would be cold. Obviously they could not heat the whole house as we are able to today. The older children slept in the large single room upstairs, above the keeping room, with a quilt hung between the girls and the boys. In winter there could be snow on them in the morning. Of course the baby would sleep in a cradle at the foot of the bed downstairs, with the next oldest on a trundle bed under the parents’ bed. That is why the beds were high—so you could get the smaller trundle beds under them. We have added a few small rooms to the back of the house that were not part of the original, and we sleep there rather than in the keeping room, and we have travelled a good bit to find period pieces. These were scarce years ago, but now there has been a revival of interest in historical restoration, so we have been able to find what we were looking for, historical hinges, for example. We do have several pieces that the early occupants might have had, such as a walnut drop-leaf table that belonged to William Marsh Brooks, a Confederate soldier, and a stretcher table for dining, along with some of the chairs and pewter utensils.



The first floor “keeping room” of the reconstructed Brooks house. Dawn Gilmore researched the color scheme and staining techniques used here. In the original house, the door on the right was kicked in by the Tories as they pursued Isaac Brooks, who climbed the stairs on the left before escaping through a window.

The Importance of History

Toward the end of my March 24 conversation with Gilmore, I asked him how he found time for such extensive historical pursuits during his years as a practicing physician. He answered:

It is like any hobby. There are people who play golf or tennis every minute they can. Some people collect stamps. My father bought land. I do this.

In this last sentence—a characteristic Gilmore understatement—the operative word is *do*. He has long approached history actively, often on foot, with a strong feeling of connection to the people of the Tick Creek area of North Carolina’s backcountry. He has an eye for the details of their experience and an ear for their stories. It is important to him that their history be valued and taught. One of his most serious concerns is the waning of historical knowledge in our culture and the apparent retreat from a rigorous history curriculum in many schools, colleges, and universities. It also troubles him that so many of the students with whom he has spoken in recent years appear to live outside of any historical flow, unaware even in their own communities of people, their pursuits, and their struggles. Gilmore responds to these problems daily by continuing his lifelong

practice of reading widely and by keeping up his end of the historical conversation with family, friends, acquaintances, and the odd academic. Moreover, he and Dawn have donated land in Chatham County to Wake Forest University to establish a trust that provides need-based financial aid to undergraduate students. In awarding the Brooks and Dawn Gilmore scholarships, preference is given to history majors from Chatham County. Regarding such generosity, I would simply paraphrase Gilmore's brief but profound observation about his Chatham County predecessor Dr. David Watson, and say that the Gilmore's care and compassion will long be deeply valued.